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A STUDY IN SELMA LAGERLÖF'S STYLE

While the new edition of Selma Lagerlöf's works was in preparation the authoress remarked to me with much enthusiasm that she considered the forthcoming edition far superior to any that have been published before. It has proved interesting to compare it with these.

The question of style is in Swedish a more complicated problem than it is in most languages. There is in the first place a very marked difference between the written and the spoken language (*skriftspråk*—*talspråk*). While the *talspråk* of the masses differs widely from that of the cultured, yet even the latter is very unlike the language of the books and of the press. The *skriftspråk* is very conservative, has been much more influenced by foreign languages, and is of course more objective. Lyttkens-Wulff give three different stylistic levels, each with two subdivisions. Other scholars (among whom especially Cederschiöld deserves notice) offer more or less similar classifications.

A great variety of expression could clearly be used in various ways. (I.) A writer might choose one stylistic level and adhere rigidly to that, as is the tendency of the so-called *normalstil* (used, for example, in the newspapers). (II.) Or a writer could carefully adapt his style to the matter in hand; he could make the conversational portions more colloquial than the narrative, and he could in general suit the style to the individuality of the character who is represented as speaking. The Swedish language affords excellent material for literary products that are perfect from the point of view of *stylistic gradation*. A writer can pass at will from one stylistic level to another as the level of the subject-matter rises or sinks. Most of the modern writers have employed this form of style, though of course in different ways and in varying degree. (III.) Finally, richness of expression could be used to add variety¹ to the whole without any great attempt to adapt the

¹Of course there is often a fair degree of variety possible, even within a given stylistic level. In other words, the fact that there is a choice of expressions does not necessarily imply that these belong to different levels of style. On the other hand not every idea in the language admits of doublets with stylistic distinction.

style to the changing nature of the subject-matter. Different words, forms, and constructions, that have the same meaning, but belong to different stylistic levels, could be used interchangeably throughout an entire work (or within a given portion of it), without any attempt to make use of the stylistic distinction, the only object being to bring about *stylistic variation*.

An extreme form of any of these types of style probably never occurs. That is the case also with type I, which, not being employed as a leading feature of style in the kind of literature that we are about to discuss, interests us chiefly because it is used as a modifying element in other forms of style.

In actual practice stylistic gradation is to a varying extent combined with stylistic variation. That is, an author finds it sufficient to distinguish between different levels of style only along comparatively broad lines, and can within a given level of the subject-matter generally employ variation to a degree sufficient to avoid monotony. In a style that follows the principle of gradation, variation is usually employed to a far greater extent in the narrative portion (which is, so to speak, in the author's own words) than in the conversation. Moreover, stylistic variation is in general modified to a greater or less extent by type I. That is, the distribution of the words or forms that are to give variety, is generally not even, and, in other words, the writer usually shows a decided preference for a certain type of expression. In the same way the principle of gradation is modified by type I, when, as pointed out above, it is combined with variation.

Notwithstanding this intermixture of types, it is generally not difficult to determine the classification of a given author. The postulation of these three types is, however, most valuable as a means of analyzing style along the lines indicated. It may be an open question whether stylistic gradation is or is not from the reader's point of view more desirable than stylistic variation. The former is more realistic, the latter more idealistic.

Selma Lagerlöf has not, on the whole, made any great attempt at gradation in her style.¹ She has written freely and

¹*Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* forms an exception to this statement. Cederschiöld gives an interesting sketch of the style in this book in *Språk i Språket*, II, p. 19 ff. (*Verdandis småskrifter* 164, Stockholm, 1909).

with little thought of detail in matters of style. Her writings are characterized by a natural and unrestrained variation.¹ And yet type I appears fairly prominently and is clearly noticeable in a marked preference for certain forms of expression, as will appear in detail below. There are also some traces of stylistic gradation, but this element is incomparably less strong than that of type I.

Selma Lagerlöf has written in a simple and natural way, and a leading feature of her style is its unchecked fluency. Though her language is colloquial in its tendencies, yet there is more of simplicity and elegance than of colloquialism. Her closest approach to the spoken language is to be found in *Nils Holgersson*, where, in the conversational portions, a plural subject is regularly followed by a verb in the singular.

To turn now to the new edition of Selma Lagerlöf's works, most of the changes that have been made represent a closer approach to the spoken language of the cultured. The changes in question affect about equally the narrative and the conversational portion of the text. Only in the case of one or two words have I noticed traces of a possibly intentional distinction along the lines of gradation.

In the following brief study I have confined myself to *En Herrgårdssågen*, which in its 150 pages reveals clearly enough the nature of these changes. A collation of the new and old editions of her complete works would add nothing new of importance.

The following are some of the more important cases that come under consideration:

The old editions have both *hafva* and *ha*, *taga* and *ta*, *blifva* and *bli*, etc. In the new edition the shorter forms have in many instances been substituted for the longer, so that now the latter are rare. The long form occurs, for instance, p. 12 *tage* and p. 142 *bliva*.² The shortened form of the imperative also occurs, e. g., p. 146, 147 *bli* for *blif*. This represents a lower stylistic level than the use of *bli* for *blifva*.

In the written language the auxiliary *hava* (*ha*) may be omitted in subordinate clauses, but the spoken language regularly uses it. The new edition almost entirely conforms to the colloquial usage, while the former editions very rarely ex-

¹Variation along other lines is mentioned in my article on "Upprepningar hos Selma Lagerlöf" in *Språk och Stil*, Upsala, vol. IX, p. 107.

²In the new edition the new orthography is used.

pressed the auxiliary. Several times the auxiliary is omitted also in the new edition (p. 58, 59, 133). In cases of this kind it is difficult to decide whether the irregularity is intentional or not. Neither the desire for euphony, nor for variety, nor for any other stylistic effect seems to have been the cause.

Another change related to the one just discussed is represented by "hjälppte mig så att jag fått studera", where *fått* is changed to *fick* (p. 6), and "men det var just hvad han behöft göra" (p. 13), where the present edition has *behövde*.

Swedish has three words that mean "not", namely *icke* and *ej* of the literary language, and *inte*, which belongs to the spoken idiom. Most of the modern prose writers use in the narrative *icke* as the regular word, with an occasional *ej*, while *inte* is here rare. In the conversational portions, on the other hand, *inte* is pretty regularly used. Indeed, this is one of the more important elements in style gradation.

Poetry, if not of an intentionally colloquial or light nature, regularly uses *ej*, and sometimes *icke*. Runeberg, for instance, in *Fänrik Ståls Sägner* uses both *ej* and *icke*, but *ej* occurs incomparably more often than the dissyllabic negative (respectively 291 and 24 times). This poet otherwise uses colloquialisms freely and with notable success. But he finds it unnecessary to use *inte* at all because the more literary negative *icke* is metrically equivalent to *inte*.

In her old editions Selma Lagerlöf uses most often the negative *ej*, occasionally (12 times in *En Herrgårdssägen*) *icke*. *Inte* occurs 35 times, generally in the conversational portion, but also in the narrative. On the other hand *ej* is also very common in the conversation.

Selma Lagerlöf's marked preference for *ej* is perhaps the result of the influence of poetic style. Mortensen in his book on *Selma Lagerlöf*, (Stockholm, 1908, p. 32), speaks of the influence of Tegnér and above all of Runeberg on Selma Lagerlöf's earliest work (*Gösta Berlings saga*). Indeed, she at first attempted to write Gösta Berling in verse, in a cycle like that of Fänrik Ståls Sägner. Among prose writers who prefer *ej*, I would mention Fredrika Bremer.¹

In the new edition *inte* is the only negative used, with very rare exceptions, as in *En Herrgårdssägen*, p. 108.

¹Referring to her youth, Selma Lagerlöf says in *Nils Holgersson*, p. 637, "men på kvällarna hade de samlats kring lampen och läst Tegnér och Runeberg, fru Lenngren och mamsell Bremer".

The use of *ned*—*ner* follows along different lines. The form *ned* is the more literary, and in the old editions we find Selma Lagerlöf using this exclusively. But in the new edition the colloquial *ner* occurs seven times. There is a tendency to prefer it in the conversation, but it occurs also in the narrative. In *En Herrgårdssågen* we find it five times in conversation, and twice in sentences that follow immediately upon the dialogue. In other works the distribution inclines less to a careful distinction along these lines.

The word *ock* is generally allowed to remain, but is changed to *med*, p. 27, and to *också*, p. 60. In one case (p. 41) *äfven* is changed to *också*. *Ändå* is used in place of *dock*, p. 111.

In the old editions we find the adverb *bara* scattered through the entire text. *Endast* generally occurs only in the narrative, but is used in conversation, p. 14, 53, 68, 111. In three of these cases we find in the new edition a change to *bara*, which is the more colloquial. The passage where *endast* is allowed to stand is not, strictly speaking, conversation. A violin is imagined as saying, "Jag är endast en fattigmansfiol," etc. (p. 14).

In the new edition *för* is used instead of *ty*, p. 7 and 84, in both cases in conversation. But it is allowed to remain in another instance on p. 7, possibly for the sake of euphony: "och det kan jag inte hålla för otroligt,¹ ty du ville aldrig göra annat förr i världen heller". Yet Selma Lagerlöf does not always avoid cacophony, e. g., "Och det kom ett slags blygsel över översten", and two lines further on, "Då natten äntligen var över och frukosten äten, var översten än mer skamsen över sig själv". ("Osynliga Länkar", p. 32, new edition).

The relative pronoun *hvilken*, the use of which is entirely foreign to the spoken language, is changed to *som*, p. 24. In the old edition *hvilka* is probably used here, because a relative *som* follows in the same sentence, "likaså hade det varit de, som hade låtit resa muren som skyddade fruktträdgården". (New edition).

Page 109 we find *läggas fram* in place of *framläggas*. *Ehuru* is changed to *fastän*, p. 59.

In the case of demonstrative pronouns and adjectives, the original masculine ending *-e* is changed to the *-a* regularly used

¹The new edition has *troligt*, which must be a misprint.

in the spoken language, e. g., p. 38, *denne stackare* is changed to *denna stackare*; p. 30, *hennes blinde morfar* to *hennes blinda morfar*; p. 45, *tyste och förträfflige* to *tysta och förträffliga*; and p. 42, the plural *hänsofne* to *hänsovna*.

Besides changes of the kind here mentioned, Selma Lagerlöf, has made a number of alterations that are merely improvements of individual passages, changes that among other things result in greater precision, elegance, or rhythm.

We have found three important innovations, namely, the more pronounced preference of shorter forms of verbs like *taga*—*ta*, the use of *ha* before the supine in subordinate clauses, and the exclusive use of *inte*. These changes go pretty well through all stylistic levels of the text. In a few cases, on the other hand, Selma Lagerlöf seems to have felt it sufficient to make the conversation more colloquial, while with a number of other changes there appears to be no definite plan, neither as regards thoroughness nor distribution. With the exception of a few definite categories, the authoress seems merely to have had the purpose of making her language more colloquial, and to have made here and there a change in that direction.

However, as has been shown, the tendency in all these lines is toward a greater colloquialism. The new edition represents even more than the others the manner of expression which the cultured Swede uses in actual life.

Looking at the question from another point of view, we have found her on the one hand making substantial concessions to type I, on the other hand she has made some changes that tend toward stylistic gradation. An increase in gradation and in the use of type I, both necessitate a loss to variation, the latter more than the former. Variation is now not nearly so strong a feature of Selma Lagerlöf's style as it formerly was.

I have called Selma Lagerlöf's style as it stands in the older editions, idealistic. I feel, and I think every reader feels, that her style has been admirably adapted to her subject-matter. This very harmony of style and theme has been one strong feature of her writings.

From a literary and artistic point of view, there is in the new edition less of harmony between language and content. But we must not overlook the fact that from the reader's point of view the style is perhaps better. It is more modern, more

live. There is now a little less harmony between style and theme, but there is more harmony between the style and the reader. This should bring the theme and the reader more closely together. And then the aim of all writing has been attained.

A. LOUIS ELMQUIST.

Northwestern University, Sept. 20, 1911.